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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 07 TEL AVIV 001319

SIPDIS

STATE FOR NEA, NEA/IPA, NEA/PPD

WHITE HOUSE FOR PRESS OFFICE, SIT ROOM  
NSC FOR NEA STAFF

JERUSALEM ALSO FOR ICD  
LONDON ALSO FOR HKANONA AND POL  
PARIS ALSO FOR POL  
ROME FOR MFO  
E.O. 12958: N/A  
TAGS: IS\_KMDR MEDIA REACTION REPORT  
SUBJECT: ISRAEL MEDIA REACTION

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SUBJECTS COVERED IN THIS REPORT:  
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11. Syrian-Lebanese Track

12. Mideast

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Key stories in the media:  
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On Sunday, Jerusalem Post cited President Bush's weekly radio address, in which he hailed recent moves toward democracy in the Middle East.

Ha'aretz reported that Sharon will visit the U.S. on April 12, his first visit since President Bush's reelection. The newspaper quoted GOI sources as saying that Sharon will be focusing his efforts on strengthening understandings with Bush from last April with respect to Israel's ongoing control of large settlement blocs, and concerning a solution to the Palestinian refugee problem outside the borders of Israel. Ha'aretz says that Jerusalem expects disengagement, the situation in Lebanon, and the war against terror to figure prominently in Sharon's upcoming visit, and anticipates that Bush will not pressure Sharon to renew negotiations with the Palestinians on a final-status agreement. Ha'aretz writes that Sharon is expected to hand over to the U.S. administration intelligence data revealing serious deficiencies in the reorganization of the Palestinian security forces. The newspaper reported that Abbas is slated to be in Washington ahead of Sharon, whom he will meet before his trip. Maariv reported that Japanese PM Junichiro Koizumi has invited Sharon and Abbas to a summit meeting at the resort of Hakone. No date has been set for the meeting.

Ha'aretz and Jerusalem Post reported that Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz and PA Chairman Mahmoud Abbas will meet this week in an effort to advance talks between Israel and the PA. According to the newspapers, Mofaz and Abbas will try to make progress on the issue of transferring security responsibility for West Bank cities in the hands of the Palestinians. Leading media reported that on Sunday, the heads of the Israeli and Palestinian security committees -- Brig. Gen. Gadi Eisencott and Gen. Haj Ismail -- met again in a good atmosphere. However, Ha'aretz notes that IDF sources advised a cautious approach to Palestinian reports that the two officers had come to an agreement on transferring security for Tulkarm, and perhaps Jericho, to the PA already on Tuesday.

Israel Radio reported that two Israelis were wounded by gunfire in Hebron this morning, one of them seriously. On Sunday, citing news agencies, Ha'aretz quoted a senior Palestinian security official as saying that Palestinian police seized weapons on Saturday near Hebron.

Jerusalem Post reported that the IDF expects illegal settler outposts to mushroom across the West Bank, but that it is not likely to take any action against them since troops will be tied up with the disengagement. Leading media reported that following a Lebanese government announcement on Sunday that Syrian troops would be redeployed to the east the next day, Hizbullah called for a peaceful pro-Syria mass rally in Beirut. On Sunday, leading media quoted Sharon as saying, in response to Syrian President Bashar Assad's speech on Saturday, that Syria must withdraw completely from Lebanon, and that Israel will not be satisfied with a partial pullout. All media reported on U.S. pressure

on Syria in the matter.

On Sunday, Jerusalem Post quoted a PA official as saying that jailed Fatah leader Marwan Barghouti is believed to have orchestrated a rebellion against the top leadership of Fatah.

Maariv reported that the residents of all four northern West Bank settlements slated for evacuation are conducting advanced negotiations for the terms of their departure. Jerusalem Post reported that 45 Gaza settlers on Sunday petitioned the High Court of Justice protesting the Disengagement Implementation Law and the terms of compensation it offers the Jewish residents due to be evacuated from Gaza and the northern West Bank starting July 20.

Jerusalem Post reported that PM Sharon told visiting Jordanian FM Hani Fawzi al-Mulki on Sunday that Israel will not let a brigade of Palestinian soldiers trained in Jordan, the Badr brigade, across the Jordan River to take up security duties in the West Bank. At the same time, Sharon said that Israel would support the training of PA security officials in Jordan. Al-Mulki was quoted as saying in an interview with Jerusalem Post that Syria was serious about entering peace talks with Israel and that Jordan would press the U.S. to force Israel to withdraw from Syrian lands if Syria withdraws from Lebanon. On Sunday, Ha'aretz reported that Israel could release Jordanian prisoners before FM Silvan Shalom's visit to Amman scheduled for the end of the month. Leading media quoted al-Mulki as saying that King Abdullah of Jordan is not expected to visit Israel soon.

Ha'aretz reported that lingering mutual suspicions are holding up the agreement to deploy Egyptian forces along the Philadelphia route. In particular, the newspaper cited the Israeli defense establishment's concern about the proposed upgrading of the Egyptian military with advanced American weapons systems at a time when its commanders still consider Israel a potential threat against which they must prepare themselves.

Leading media cited an interview Abbas granted Time Magazine, in which he said: "President Bush doesn't have the right to prejudice final-status issues. These issues should be discussed in the final stages, not now." Abbas also denied Bush's role in the democratization of the Middle East, and placed responsibility for the February 25 suicide bombing in Tel Aviv on Israel.

Leading media reported that FM Silvan Shalom met in New York with Senator Hillary Clinton, who told him she had demanded that the U.S. impose sanctions on Syria to force it to leave Lebanon. Ha'aretz reported that Sharon will meet Tuesday with Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley.

Ha'aretz and Israel Radio reported that Israel responded skeptically to reports published Sunday, stating that Damascus instructed senior Islamic Jihad and Hamas leaders to leave Syria, following the Tel Aviv suicide bombing. Jerusalem Post cited an Islamic Jihad announcement that the attack was carried out by a rogue cell.

On Sunday, Maariv and Yediot cited the Foreign Ministry's denial on Saturday of a report by the Irish newspaper Evening Herald that a Mossad hit squad was stopped as it was planning to kill two members of the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades who had been deported to Ireland after the siege of the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem three years ago.

All media, except Jerusalem Post, led with what police officials called the biggest money-laundering case in Israeli history, thought to involve hundreds of millions of dollars in the past year. Twenty-four employees, past and present, of Bank Hapoalim's Hayarkon Street branch were arrested on Sunday. The police froze 180 accounts held by 18 customers in the branch. Among those likely to be questioned are Maariv owner Vladimir Gusinsky and Israel's Ambassador to the UK Zvi Hefetz, who was Gusinsky's point man in Israel.

On Sunday, Maariv and Ha'aretz presented the findings of a study carried out by Prof. Steven Cohen of the Hebrew University among U.S. Jews, which show a 15-20 percent drop between 2002 and 2004 in nearly all the indicators measuring emotional attachment to Israel. On Sunday, Ha'aretz cited another recent study, carried out on behalf of the United Jewish Communities of North

America, showing that only 4 percent of Jewish students with a non-Jewish parent feel a special link to Israel. Forty-five percent of the Jewish students in America have a non-Jewish parent.

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**11. Syrian-Lebanese Track:**  
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Summary:  
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Former ambassador to the U.S. Prof. Itamar Rabinovich wrote in mass-circulation, pluralist Yediot Aharonot: "The U.S. now clearly wishes to take absolute advantage of Syria's vulnerability in Lebanon in order to extract concessions on other contentious issues, and perhaps to demolish Assad's regime completely."

Arab affairs correspondent Smadar Perry wrote in Yediot Aharonot: "These players could draw Israel into a very complex and dangerous situation."

Arab affairs correspondent Jackie Hoogie wrote in popular, pluralist Maariv: "[The Syrian President's speech] was Bashar Assad in the mold of Hafez Assad."

Block Quotes:  
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**I. "The United States Will Not Give Up"**

Former ambassador to the U.S. Prof. Itamar Rabinovich wrote in mass-circulation, pluralist Yediot Aharonot (March 7): "U.S. pressure in recent days and the question of the Syrian withdrawal [from Lebanon] have focused international attention on the issue of Syrian hegemony in Lebanon. But the U.S. has a broader agenda vis-a-vis Damascus. Washington has identified Lebanon as Syria's Achilles heel and has decided to concentrate its efforts on that issue. In fact, the U.S. is striving to obtain concessions from Syria on other matters and it views Syria as a target for political changes and the key to a regional transformation.... The U.S. now clearly wishes to take absolute advantage of Syria's vulnerability in Lebanon in order to extract concessions on other contentious issues, and perhaps to demolish Assad's regime completely.... Damascus wishes to convey a clear message to the Lebanese opposition: if you continue to demand a Syrian pullout, we will support a Shi'ite demand for a new balance of power in Lebanon in order to reflect the fact that the Shi'ites have become the largest community in the country

**II. "A Dangerous Situation For Israel"**

Arab affairs correspondent Smadar Perry wrote in Yediot Aharonot (March 6): "A security and governmental vacuum was created in Lebanon in the wake of the Hariri assassination, and this vacuum has been expanding with the passage of every day.... Hizbullah has gained the most from this situation.... Even if Assad sincerely intends to redeploy his 14,000 troops in Lebanon, he has absolutely no intention of releasing his grip on it. In the last four months the number of Syrian intelligence agents stationed in Beirut has risen from a few hundred to thousands. Now they are being joined by Hizbullah guerrillas, Iranian Revolutionary Guardsmen and Lebanese intelligence agents, who long ago began taking orders from Damascus. These players could draw Israel into a very complex and dangerous situation."

**III. "Hafez's Son"**

Arab affairs correspondent Jackie Hoogie wrote in popular, pluralist Maariv (March 6): "In his speech, [Bashar] Assad had a few objectives in sight. First he had to gain a little time until the Arab League Summit, which is due to gather in Algiers this month, and where he hopes to have the League endorse his presence in Lebanon with an official resolution.... A second objective is the splitting of the [Lebanese] opposition.... The Syrian President is now hoping to divide the world's powers -- America, which has already announced that his declaration was not enough, on one side, and all the European states, which will insist on waiting and seeing and on granting the guy some more time... In brief, this was Bashar Assad in the mold of Hafez Assad."

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12. Mideast:  
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Summary:  
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Conservative, independent Jerusalem Post editorialized: "The greatest crime, in the PA's eyes, is not terror itself but thwarting terror."

Senior op-ed writer Akiva Eldar opined in left-leaning, independent Ha'aretz: "Democracy's loss will only be peace's gain if Sharon commits to putting the peace process back on track where it was left by the left after his famous trip to the Temple Mount."

Rabbi Yehiel Eckstein, president and founder of the International Fellowship of Christians and Jews, wrote in Ha'aretz: "At a time when the rest of the world is arrayed against us, evangelical Christians are true friends who stand alongside us."

Block Quotes:  
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I. "Back to Thugocracy"

Conservative, independent Jerusalem Post editorialized (March 6): "Scant international or even local attention has been accorded news that the Palestinian Authority has decided to resume executions by the end of this month. Of the 15 inmates on death row, none are terrorists, but about half were convicted for 'collaborating with Israel.' Presumably the latter offense includes helping Israel foil suicide bombings. By our book that not only is the last deed for which one ought to be put to death, but it is precisely what the PA ought to be encouraging.... When the PA imposes capital punishment on those it charges with helping Israelis root out terror (allegations which are highly dubious in most cases), it only adds insult to the injury inherent in its own inaction. It says the greatest crime, in the PA's eyes, is not terror itself but thwarting terror. Nor is there any reason to trust the PA judicial system. The last time such 'collaborators' were executed officially was on a January morning in 2001. 'Trials' are normally brief and haphazard affairs that in no democratic country would be considered due process.... While Israel is denied credit for its incomparably autonomous and unregimented judiciary, the mockery of what parades as law next door escapes censure.... We agree with Minister Natan Sharansky's urgent plea to Prime Minister Ariel Sharon that Israel immediately demand the PA desist from this travesty-in-the-making. "

II. "Democracy's Losses"

Senior op-ed writer Akiva Eldar opined in left-leaning, independent Ha'aretz (March 7): "The day after the London meeting last week, one of the newspapers reported that 'there is growing fear in Jerusalem that after the disengagement from Gaza, international pressure will mount concerning a final status agreement.' That's right -- fear of a peace agreement. Abu Mazen's call to adopt the principle of mutuality with regard to actions against terror and the occupation, as written and agreed to with signatures in the road map plan, has not echoed in the public arena.... Sharon will deserve the compassion of the peace camp only if he orders an immediate end to all the unilateral steps he is taking in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, starting with the construction of the fence outside the sovereign territory of Israel. Democracy's loss will only be peace's gain if Sharon commits to putting the peace process back on track where it was left by the left after his famous trip to the Temple Mount."

III. "We Need Evangelical Christian Support"

Rabbi Yehiel Eckstein, president and founder of the International Fellowship of Christians and Jews, wrote in Ha'aretz (March 7): "In a recent op-ed column ('A Pernicious, Dangerous Alliance,' Ha'aretz, February 23), Knesset Member Avshalom Vilan expressed concern about the alliance that is being 'forged' between evangelical Christians in the U.S. and the extreme right in Israel. A sober and correct consideration of the situation would lead to the conclusion that today, more than ever, Israel and its leaders should welcome

the embrace offered by the evangelical community, which should not be taken lightly. This support is particularly important given recent expressions of anti-Semitism and the anti-Israeli attitude of Europe and the UN.... In contrast to the evangelical movement, the Presbyterian Church, which is considered one of the liberal Protestant movements, declared a consumer boycott and a move toward divestment from Israel a few months ago. The Presbyterians were not even embarrassed to say their objective was to produce economic isolation, as was done to South Africa during apartheid. The Episcopalian Church is considering doing something similar.... This boycott does not issue from sublime humanitarian motives. These churches did not call for a boycott of the darkest and most savage regimes known to humanity.... While it is true that many of the evangelical Christians belong to the right wing of the political map, their love for Israel is unconditional.... At a time when the rest of the world is arrayed against us, evangelical Christians are true friends who stand alongside us."

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